

TECHNIQUES OF IRONY IN LIGHT OF THE ROMANTIC THEORY¹

by Ernst Behler

In 1797, Ludwig Tieck published the dramatic comedy *Der gestiefelte Kater* in the second volume of his *Gesammelte Volksmärchen*. The material for this play was drawn from the collection of *Contes de ma mère l'oie* by Charles Perrault; as in the world-famous fairy tale, a grateful cat helps a poor miller's son to become the Count of Carabas and eventually to marry the King's beautiful daughter. Tieck used the plot of the fairy tale as the basis for a satirical diatribe directed against the representatives of the Enlightenment and their melodramatic plays of sentiment, so popular at the time. Yet this travesty has come to be regarded as a model of so-called Romantic irony.² Although Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater* has precedents in earlier plays, his Romantic comedy constituted the epitome of a particular dramatic device. More predominantly than in other contemporary works, the course of action is here repeatedly interrupted, and the intensification of theatrical illusion is again and again destroyed.

Tieck achieved this effect mainly by presenting on stage along with the actors not only the audience, but even the poet, who often comments to his public directly. Observers in the audience, in turn, make exclamations such as: "Was mich nur ärgert, ist daß sich kein Mensch im Stück über den Kater wundert; der König und alle tun, als müßte es so sein."—"Unmöglich kann ich da in eine vernünftige Illusion hineinkommen." Truly "beautiful moments," especially in love scenes, are greeted by the audience with appreciative cries of "Das war doch etwas fürs Herz!"—"Das tut einem wieder einmal wohl!"—"Obs aber zum Ganzen wird notwendig sein?," whereas the cat merely remarks from the stage: "Sie sind da unten ins Poetische hineingeplumpst!" Upon reciting his part in the comedy, an actor remarks: "Verfluchte Unnatürlichkeiten sind da in dem Stück," saying to the King: "Sein Sie doch ja damit ruhig, denn sonst merkt es ja am Ende das Publikum da unten, daß das eben sehr unnatürlich ist." To this the King replies: "Schadet nichts, es hat vorher geklatscht, und da kann ich

Editor's Note: Mr. Behler is Professor of Germanics and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington.

schon etwas bieten." In order to intensify the effect of these reflections, Tieck has a buffoon and a court sage dispute in the third act the question as to whether the new play with the title *Der gestiefelte Kater* is a good play and whether the audience had been correctly depicted, whereupon the astonished outcry arises from the depths of the audience: "Das Publikum? Es kommt ja kein Publikum in dem Stück vor!"³

Also in 1797, Friedrich Schlegel published a collection of 127 critical aphorisms in the periodical *Lyceum*, some of which have often been taken as a theoretical definition of the literary technique employed by Tieck. However, these aphorisms had no demonstrable influence on Tieck and indeed go considerably beyond his intentions. In his collection Schlegel designated as the central motif of irony a constant disruption and transcendence of one's own poetic creations. In Aphorism 42, he said:

Es gibt alte und moderne Gedichte, die durchgängig im Ganzen und überall den göttlichen Hauch der Ironie atmen. Es lebt in ihnen wirklich eine transzendente Buffonerie. Im Innern, die Stimmung, welche alles übersieht, und sich über alles Bedingte unendlich erhebt, auch über eigne Kunst, Tugend, oder Genialität: im Äußern, in der Ausführung, die mimische Manier eines guten italienischen Buffo.

This mood, by which the author "rises infinitely" above everything finite, is expressly described in Aphorism 108, where Schlegel says of irony:

Sie enthält und erregt ein Gefühl von dem unauf löslichen Widerstreit des Unbedingten und des Bedingten, der Unmöglichkeit und Notwendigkeit einer vollständigen Mitteilung. Sie ist die freieste aller Lizenzen, denn durch sie setzt man sich über sich selbst weg: und doch auch die gesetzlichste, denn sie ist unbedingt notwendig.⁴

These comments on the creative process clearly anticipate the principles of the definition of irony later to be formulated in the *Athenaeum*. Here, in Aphorism 51, Schlegel characterized irony by means of two interrelated terms, calling it a "steter Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung." A similar and recurrent formulation of the same phenomenon is the phrase "bis zur Ironie gebildet," by which Schlegel understood the highest artistic perfection, a perfection, however, which just because of its utmost achievement necessarily leads to self-criticism, and thus shifts to its contrary.⁵ As is evident from these quotations, Schlegel found two antagonistic powers in the author's creative drive. The positive pole of this dialectical pair is an effervescent poetic enthusiasm for expression, which is called self-creation in the more subjective language of the *Athenaeum*. The counterbalancing, limiting, and corrective scepticism towards the poet's own productive powers is termed self-destruction. The result of this ironical alternation between self-creation and self-destruction Schlegel labels "self-restraint" ("*Selbstbeschränkung*"), i.e., the disciplined mastering of the creative drive.⁶

Although this oscillation between self-creation and self-destruction,

enthusiasm and scepticism, characterizes the essential meaning of Schlegel's concept of irony, we see upon closer examination that there are other aspects of irony delineated in the *Athenaeum*. In Aphorisms 116 and 238 a different nuance comes to light, which has close ties with the theory of the novel, so central to Schlegel's thought at that time. He was attracted to the genre of the novel because of its potentiality for allowing the personality of the writer to manifest itself in the work to such an extraordinary degree that the author himself becomes its central component. Just as Fichte had taught that there must be an intimate unity between the philosopher and his system, so Schlegel believed that poetry should combine its poetic substance "mit der künstlerischen Reflexion und schönen Selbstbespiegelung" of the author. In his words, poetry should "in jeder ihrer Darstellungen sich selbst mit darstellen, und überall Poesie und Poesie der Poesie sein."⁷ In his famous Aphorism 116, he remarked that Romantic poetry can soar, free from all real and ideal interests, on the wings of poetic reflection midway between the work and the artist and can even exponentiate this reflection and multiply it as in an endless series of mirrors. For this beautiful self-mirroring of the author in his work, Schlegel coined the term "poetische Reflexion," and in this concept we can see a reformulation of his original definition of Romantic irony.⁸

This theory of irony had strong repercussions and came to be considered the core of that mental attitude labeled by later critics as Romantic irony. Regarding the influence of his aphorisms, Schlegel said: "Erst seitdem ist die Ironie an die Tagesordnung gekommen."⁹ In fact, this device of irony certainly constitutes a prominent feature of German literature of the time. It was utilized on the stage—obviously in the wake of Tieck—in Grabbe's *Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung* (1827), a play in which the author appears on stage and is greeted by his characters with the salutation: "Er ist so dumm wie ein Kuhfuß, schimpft auf alle Schriftsteller und taugt selber nichts, hat verrenkte Beine, schielende Augen und ein fades Affengesicht." Yet another actor comments: "Wie erbittert sind Sie gegen einen Mann, der Sie geschrieben hat!"¹⁰ René Wellek has noted: "Today it is frequently forgotten that devices considered strikingly modern were common among the German Romantics."¹¹

In the sphere of narration, this tendency was certainly inspired by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. The atmosphere of irony which animates this novel was first described by Friedrich Schlegel and considered to derive from a seemingly capricious attitude of the author towards his work and his hero. More precisely, Schlegel points out "daß der Dichter selbst die Personen und die Begebenheiten so leicht und so launig zu nehmen, den Helden fast nie ohne Ironie zu erwähnen, und auf sein Meisterwerk selbst von der Höhe seines Geistes herabzulächeln scheint."¹² But it is Brentano's novel *Godwi* that presents the most remarkable degree of originality in

the implementation of the ironic device. The author, Maria, meets his hero Godwi and exclaims: "Dies war also Godwi, von dem ich so viel geschrieben habe....Ich hatte ihn mir ganz anders vorgestellt." The hero retaliates against such mistreatment by saying: "Dies ist der Teich, in den ich Seite 266 im ersten Band falle."¹³ Brentano drives this technique to its utmost potential when the author of the novel finally dies and is said to have been bored to death while engaged in composing the second part of his story.

This ironic counterpoint of illusionary poetry and empirical reality was used by the Romantics not only in the sense of a destruction of imagination through reality, but also in the reversed procedure of transporting the real into the imaginative sphere. Novalis says in one of his aphorisms: "Die Kunst auf eine angenehme Art zu befremden, einen Gegenstand fremd zu machen und doch bekannt und anziehend, das ist die romantische Poetik,"¹⁴ a statement which seems to anticipate the dramatic device of alienation. E. T. A. Hoffmann was a master of the art of blending together two different spheres of reality, of transposing prosaic everyday scenes into a fantastic milieu, of abruptly switching from ordinary events to fanciful occurrences. We have just to think of the scene in the *Der goldne Topf* in which Anselmus takes leave of Archivarius Lindhorst only to see him take flight and soar above the Elbe River, coat tails flying in the air—and this related as if it were the most natural form of departure.¹⁵

In the genre of lyric poetry, Romantic irony was utilized at a relatively late date. When it made its appearance in Heinrich Heine's poetic works, the basic structure reflected the previously mentioned discrepancy of the poetic and the empirical worlds. Here, however, it is intimately bound to the phenomenon of the lyrical ego. By nature, this lyrical ego has a broad, transcendental, and, if not universal, then at least a widely human scope that surpasses the limited existence of the individual poet.¹⁶ Irony comes to the fore when the metaphysical being of the lyrical ego is suddenly exchanged for the empirical ego of the individual poet. There are, of course, other modes of irony in lyric poetry, but an illustration of this particular type can be found in an episode of Heine's lyric cycle *Die Nordsee* in which the poet feels the irresistible attraction of a female creature from the depths of the sea. Just at the point of plunging himself into union with her, he is held back by a firm grip at the ankle and hears the captain query: "Doktor, sind Sie des Teufels?"¹⁷

Aside from these literary creations, irony was to become a prominent theme of nineteenth-century aesthetics in the works of Jean Paul, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Solger. Last but not least, Romantic irony came into its own through the sharp polemics of Hegel and, in his wake, Kierkegaard, who attacked this seemingly pernicious ironic posture. Romantic irony appeared to these thinkers, who concerned themselves only

with the Absolute, as irresponsible arbitrariness. In a famous dictum taken up by Kierkegaard, Hegel called this supposedly playful mood the very height of subjectivity separating itself from the unifying substance, or in the semireligious language of his *Phenomenology*, "das deklarierte Böse."¹⁸ Elaborating upon this thought, Kierkegaard said:

Irony now appeared as that attitude for which there was nothing sacred left; this irony was through with everything, yet at the same time had absolute power to do everything. Whenever irony allowed something to remain, this was only with the knowledge of being able to destroy it, and this knowledge was present at the same moment in which the object was permitted to endure. If it posited something, it knew it had the authority to annul it, and this at the same moment it was posited. It knew itself to be in complete possession of the absolute power to bind and to loose.¹⁹

But this form of Romantic irony is by no means limited to German literature. An essential quality of Lord Byron's late satire *Don Juan* resides precisely in this ironic distrust of the poet towards his own artistic emotions and, more specifically, in the intermingling of the conflicting feelings of affection and repulsion, of enthusiasm and boredom, of delight and scepticism. To a certain extent the author permeates his work in a dual fashion by depicting the passions of his characters, their desires, loves, and longings, in captivating verses, while simultaneously smiling at the illusions of youth, thereby emphasizing with wit and irony the contradictions of their pretensions.²⁰ The double presence of the author as both creative poet and cynical commentator creates a mocking tone from the very beginning, an ironical attitude that regards the author's own creation with suspicion:

All these things will be specified in time,
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,
The Vade Mecum of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets and some fools;
Prose poets like blank verse, I'm fond of rhyme,
Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;
I've got new mythological machinery,
And very handsome supernatural scenery.²¹

It is in a similar vein, yet concerned more directly with the illusions of youth than with his own creation, that Stendhal utilizes Romantic irony, especially in *Le Rouge et le Noir*.²² As is well known, this author's literary pursuits were guided by a philosophy of life called Beylism, which assumes an ironical pose towards existence and harbors the conviction that man's behavior is governed from within by deep and sincere passions—above all by the pursuit of happiness.²³ Man's true nature, however, is usually hidden beneath the surface of customs, habits, politeness, and certain duties considered as necessary for the self-assertion of the individual. A most important task of the author is to develop what Stendhal called "la géologie morale" of his heroes, that is, to show without illusion from what interested motives their actions and virtues spring, to pull away the masks formed

by habit, and to expose the character in his real identity. This process is unforgettably presented in the development of Stendhal's illustrious hero Julien Sorel, who is passionate and sincere by nature, but deliberately assumes a career of hypocrisy in order to play his game with society. "On a des devoirs suivant la portée de son esprit" is Julien's motto. Stendhalian irony is at its best when in crucial moments the original nature of the hero breaks through and destroys the illusion of imaginary duties.

Stendhal's technique thus consists again in a blending of two systems, that of pragmatic, even hypocritical, rationality on the surface of characters, and of sincere, individualistic feeling within. To put it differently, he confronts the intellect with the heart in the conviction that for the possessors of a sensitive heart, this masking is the only means of protection against the vulgar masses. Dostoevski was later to incorporate this dualism of intellect and heart into his works, while Friedrich Nietzsche was deeply moved by the concept of the mask as a prerequisite and protection for sincere existence, as is reflected in his statements: "Alles, was tief ist, liebt die Maske." "Jeder auserlesene Mensch trachtet instinktiv nach seiner Burg und Heimlichkeit, wo er von der Menge, den Vielen, den Allermeisten erlöst ist."²⁴ Thus Stendhal's "géologie morale" transcends the realm of Romanticism and points to the more psychological trends of the future. Interestingly enough, it was Nietzsche who first recognized the affiliation between Stendhal and Dostoevski when in February 1887 in Nice he found by chance or, as he felt, by instinct, the new French translation of Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground* (*L'esprit souterrain*). He characterized this work as a "Geniestreich der Psychologie, eine Art Selbstverhöhnung des γνῶθι σαυτόν," and added in a letter to Overbeck: "Ich muß bis zu meinem Bekanntwerden mit Stendhals *Rouge et Noir* zurückgehen, um einer gleichen Freude mich zu erinnern."²⁵ The ironical implications of this self-disdain of "Know Thyself" will be discussed toward the end of this paper.

Romantic irony has been given so much emphasis here because it marks a turning point, if not in the development of ironic practices, then at least in the history of the concept. When we employ this term we are hardly aware of the fact that until the end of the eighteenth century, the meaning of irony was extremely limited in Western criticism. Authors such as Diderot, Fielding, or Sterne would have been astonished to hear us interpret their literary creations as displaying irony—to say nothing of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and other older models of the ironic style. Until far into the eighteenth century the word irony maintains a strict and consistent connotation and designates an established form of speech or literary communication which can be reduced to the simple formula, "une figure par laquelle on veut faire entendre le contraire de ce qu'on dit." This quotation was taken from the renowned French Encyclopedia of 1765 and contains the essence of the definitions of irony in numerous handbooks of the various

European literatures.²⁶ One could easily demonstrate that whenever irony is the subject of a formal discussion prior to the Romantic era, it is this basic concept that is reiterated with slight variations—a demonstration that shall not be presented here at length. When Defoe was accused of excessive satire in certain treatises, he defended them as being ironic:

The Books I have written are as plain a Satyr upon the Pretender and his Friends, as can be written, if they are view'd Impartially; but being written Ironically, all the first Part, if taken asunder from the last Part, will read, as in all Ironicals speaking must be, just contrary....²⁷

A similar excuse was given by Swift for his bitterly satirical *Proposal to pay off the National Debt without raising any taxes*: "The Reader will perceive the following Treatise to be altogether Ironical," an assertion indicating that he had said the contrary of what he actually thought.²⁸

One should perhaps mention that this original definition of irony occasionally has the qualification that the rhetorical dissimulation should have an agreeable effect, in accordance with the Ciceronian formula designating the presence of irony, "cum toto genere Orationis severe ludas, cum aliter sentias ac loquare."²⁹ Swift, however, provides the exception to the rule, for his figures of speech certainly cannot be said to have a jocose flavor. Indeed, his suggestion of devouring little children as a remedy for the famine in Ireland in his *Modest Proposal* assumes a biting if not morbid character.³⁰

Whereas irony retained the meaning of a trope "where the contrary is meant to what is said" well into the eighteenth century, this classical frame was sprung by the Romantics, who conceived of it as a device permitting the author to rise above the confines of his work, to appear within it, and to exhibit deliberately the fictional character of his creation. Although this literary strategy had never been called ironic until this time, it was nevertheless nothing new at all. From a broader perspective, we see that this literary practice had been flourishing throughout the eighteenth century, reaching its height in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.³¹ Blank pages of this novel represent missing chapters which are inserted in subsequent parts of the work with the explanation: "For how was it possible they [the readers] should foresee the necessity I was under of writing the 25th chapter of my book before the 18th!" Or the omission of a description of a journey is justified by the ironic reflection:

But the painting of this journey, upon reviewing it, appears to be so much above the style and manner of anything else I have been able to paint in this book, that it could not have remained in it without depreciating every other scene; and destroying at the same time that necessary equipoise and balance (whether good or bad) betwixt chapter and chapter, from whence the just proportions and harmony of the whole work results.³²

Thus it becomes evident that the Romantic doctrine of irony was by no means thought to delineate something new, but rather intended to give

an essential feature of modern literature, long in existence, its name. The intermingling of two spheres of reality, the bringing together of lofty and trivial things, and the contradictory voices that sharpen the contour of what is happening, was detected in Shakespeare, whose irony was discussed by August Wilhelm Schlegel precisely in these terms.³³

The coincidence of contrasting elements, of mirth and sadness, so essential to the newly envisioned concept of irony also evokes a figure who with fool's cap and bells is a predominant character of Renaissance literature—the wise fool, who appears in Sebastian Brant with death-inviting gestures, in Rabelais with excessive Pantagruelistic laughter, in Cervantes with mournful countenance, in Shakespeare with the burlesque buffoonery of Falstaff, but in Erasmus with the full decorum of classical rhetoric. What characterizes this type of irony is a peculiar combination of jest and seriousness, wisdom and foolishness, knowledge and ignorance.³⁴ When in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Stultitia (Folly) praises what is blameworthy and blames matters that deserve praise, the author seems to apply the basic ironic formula of saying the contrary of what one really thinks. Yet Folly carries the reversal of established evaluations to such an extreme that this ironic inversion suddenly becomes earnest, so that foolishness appears as wisdom, and wisdom as foolishness. Finally, Folly confronts us with one of the most subtle ideas in Christianity, the fool in Christ.³⁵

The most brilliant embodiment of Romantic irony in the form of the author's critical remarks towards his own production, of inserting subjective commentaries on the novel within a novel, was seen by the Romantic critics in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. It is, indeed, a characteristic feature of *Don Quixote*, especially of the second part, that the author repeatedly breaks through the atmosphere of the narration and addresses critical questions and reflections to his reader. In this manner, Cervantes liked to call certain portions of his work "apocryphal," since Sancho Panza made various statements in them which were impossible to reconcile with his limited intelligence.³⁶ In Chapter 2 of the second part, in a conversation with his master, Sancho Panza discusses Don Quixote's true identity, pointing out that there is a book about *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*. In the following conversation, Cervantes puts his critics on trial through the questions of Don Quixote.³⁷ On the whole, this second part is characterized by the confrontation of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza with people to whom they are familiar through the reading of the first part. In other words, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza here step out of the literary sphere, in which they have heretofore lived, into the real world—which, however, is merely the intensified literary realm of the first part.³⁸

Yet if one were to pursue the line of development of this kind of irony, one would soon be brought from the Renaissance back into the Middle Ages. The emergence of the author from within his work can already be

found in Chaucer, especially in that episode of *The Canterbury Tales* in which the narrator, the Inn-keeper, suddenly notices an unfamiliar figure among the pilgrims. It is, indeed, Chaucer himself whom the narrator pointedly addresses:

'Say something now, as other folk have done;
And let it be a tale of mirth; at once!
'Host', I replied, 'I hope you are not one
To take it in bad part if I'm a dunce;
I only know a rhyme which, for the nonce,
I learnt.' 'That's good,' he said, 'well take your place;
It should be dainty, judging by your face.'³⁹

At this request, Chaucer proceeds to relate the courtly tale of *Sir Topaz*, only to be rudely interrupted in the middle of a sentence:

'No more of this for God's dear dignity!
Our Host said suddenly, 'You're wearying me
To death, I say, with your illiterate stuff.'⁴⁰

At the end of the *Tales*, Chaucer makes apologies to those who might be displeased by his work, begging them to "impute it to the fault of my want of ability, and not to my will, who would very gladly have said better if I had had the power," a self-deprecation reminiscent of his *Prologue*, where he had said, "I'm short of wit as you will understand."⁴¹

Similar postures of humility can be observed throughout the Middle Ages. To give but one famous early example, one could refer to Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, where the author claims at the end of Book 2: "ine kan decheinen buochstap."⁴² At this point, however, our derivational tree of Romantic irony becomes very controversial, since we are touching upon the noted humility device, the *parvitas*-formula of "*mediocritas mea*" and similar assertions of incompetence. This attitude has been traced back as far as *I Corinthians* 15: 9-12, where the apostle Paul states regarding himself: "*ego enim sum minimus Apostolorum, qui non sum dignus vocari Apostolus*,"—clearly exhibiting the Christian virtue of humility, certainly different from ironic dissimulation. In its literary shape, the humility device seems to derive from classical rhetoric, Cicero's *De inventione* I, 16, 22, prescribing strict rules for the author's "*proemium*," his introduction, for the purpose of "*captatio benevolentiae*." As early as the fifth and sixth centuries, these rules had become clichés of the stylistic mannerism of late antiquity and yet were to prevail during the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance and Baroque periods.⁴³ In the Preface to his *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, a comprehensive scholarly study on Greek mythology, Boccaccio, for instance, addresses King Hugo IV of Cyprus and Jerusalem, ostensibly his patron, by way of this humility device:

Atlas was able to uphold the heaven on his head, and Alcides was equal to relieving him of the weary load—divine men both and both invincibly strong. But me? What am I but a little fellow, weak, slow-witted, forgetful. And here you are trying to pile on my shoulders not heaven alone, which was enough for those old heroes, but earth too, and the seas, nay, the very gods with all their notable train! Why, it's nothing but a proposal to crush and destroy me.⁴⁴

This topos of affected modesty can be traced throughout the centuries. It should be born in mind, however, that here we are dealing with a different and autonomous topos that should be distinguished from irony.

In order to understand this integration of modern literary practices with the ancient concept of irony, it seems appropriate to consider the derivation and the techniques of classical irony, a form that had most tenaciously been preserved in the classical system of rhetoric. Rhetoric was the second of the seven liberal arts and certainly the most important subject for literary training, having exerted for centuries a decisive and continuous influence on the course of Western literature as a whole. Rhetoric formed that part of encyclopedic scholastic tradition which emphasized the art of public speaking, or of persuasion, in its curriculum. If in this schematized structure one were to look for the classical topos of irony, one would find it first in the column of the tropes, that is, under indirect modes of speech (including metaphor, allegory, metalepsis, irony, hyperbaton) and secondly, in the rubric of figures of speech, that is, of unusual verbal constructions (including question, anticipation, hesitation, consultation, apostrophe, illustration, irony, feigned regret, intimation, and so forth). In fact, irony is discussed by the classical rhetoricians in connection with peculiar idiosyncracies of style. Aristotle mentions it in the third book of his *Rhetoric*, which is devoted to style, and designates it as "a mockery of oneself": "Some of the forms befit a gentleman, and some do not; irony befits him more than does buffoonery. The jests of the ironical man are at his own expense; the buffoon excites laughter at others."⁴⁵

From other passages in his works, especially from his *Ethics*, we know that Aristotle conceived of irony as a noble self-deprecation. "Irony is the contrary of boastful exaggeration," he states, "it is a self-deprecating concealment of one's powers and possessions—it shows better taste to depreciate than to exaggerate one's virtues."⁴⁶ Cicero, who introduced the term into the Latin world and rendered it by "dissimulatio" ("ea dissimulatio, quam Graeci εἰρωνεία vocant"),⁴⁷ discussed irony in his work *De Oratore* in connection with figures of speech; he defined irony as saying one thing and meaning another, explaining that it had a very great influence on the minds of the audience and was extremely entertaining if it was presented in a conversational rather than declamatory tone.⁴⁸ Finally, Quintilian assigned irony its position among the tropes and figures discussed in the eighth and ninth books of his *Institutio oratoria*, where its basic

characteristic was that the intention of the speaker differs from what he actually says, that we understand the contrary of what he expresses in speech: "in utroque enim contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est."⁴⁹ In addition to these two formal modes of irony, Quintilian mentions a third, which transcends the scope of mere rhetoric: "Cum etiam, vita universa ironiam habere videatur, qualis est visa Socratis; nam ideo dictus agens imperitum et admiratorem aliorum tanquam sapientium."⁵⁰

As this remark demonstrates, Quintilian, as well as Cicero and other rhetoricians, regarded Socrates as *the* master of irony, *the* εἴρων. Here we are at the very roots of our subject, and also at the origins of the word irony itself, the Greek εἰρωνεία, rendered by the Romans as "dissimulatio." The words εἰρωνεία and εἴρων, however, originally had a low and vulgar connotation, even to the extent of being an invective. We come across these terms in Aristophanes' comedies, in which the εἴρων, the ironist, is placed among liars, shysters, pettifoggers, hypocrites, and charlatans—in other words, with deceivers.⁵¹ Plato was the first to present Socrates as ironic, as an interlocutor who, by understating his talents in his famous pose of ignorance, embarrasses his partner and simultaneously leads him into the proper train of thought. Thus the attitude of the ironic figure was freed from the burlesque coarseness of the classical comedy and appeared with that refined, human, and humorous self-deprecation that made Socrates the paragon of the teacher.

Yet even in Plato's dialogues, where the spirit of Socratic irony is so obviously present, the term irony still retains its derogatory cast in the sense of hoax and hypocrisy and, as such, evinces the Sophist attitude of intellectual deception and false pretensions. In his *Republic*, for example, Plato depicts the scene in which Socrates deliberates, in characteristic fashion, on the concept of δικαιοσύνη, i.e., justice. At a crucial point in the discussion, his conversational partner Thrasymachus explodes, begging Socrates to desist from his eternal questioning and refuting in order to make a direct statement and reveal his own opinion. Again assuming his stance of ignorance, Socrates replies that it is so utterly difficult to discover justice that they should have pity rather than scorn for him. At this, Thrasymachus cries: "By Heracles! Here again is the well-known dissimulation of Socrates! I have told these others beforehand that you would not answer, but take refuge in dissimulation." The Greek term rendered here by dissimulation is εἰρωνεία.⁵²

From many other instances in Plato's dialogues, we know that the pretended ignorance of Socrates was considered by many of his contemporaries as chicanery, scorn, or deceptive escapism, all of which made him deserve the epithet εἴρων. Only through Aristotle did irony assume that refined and urbane tinge marking the essence of "Socratic irony." This significant change in meaning can be detected in Aristotle's *Nico-*

machean Ethics, where εἰρωνεία and ἀλαζονεία, understatement and boastfulness, are discussed as modes of deviation from truth. Aristotle, however, held the opinion that irony deviates from truth not for the sake of one's own advantage, but out of a dislike for bombast, and was therefore a fine and noble form. The prototype of this genuine irony was to be found in Socrates, and thus irony had received its classical stamp.⁵³

Here it becomes evident why the Romantics included certain devices of modern literature within the concept of irony; for the situation in which Socrates was placed as a philosopher in front of his disciples appeared similar to that of the modern author in his attempt to communicate with his reader. The problem of literary communication had become increasingly complex since the classical age. The English philosopher Shaftesbury indicated how ridiculous it would be for a modern author to refer to the inspiration of his Muse, as the ancients had done.⁵⁴ Confronted with this obstacle, the modern writer assumed an attitude towards his readers strongly resembling that of Socrates towards his pupils. He understated his talents, parodied old patterns, pretended to draw on a lost manuscript, commented upon himself and his creation, and included the reader in his creative task by establishing a contrast between expectation and actual narration. Socratic irony thus served as an aid to overcome a fundamental dilemma and enabled him to convey a message which otherwise could hardly be communicated. In a word, Socratic irony became the force by which means he could—in Schlegel's terms—"infinitely rise above himself."

Thus far, we have considered certain techniques of pre-Romantic and Romantic literature as variations of the basic figure of rhetorical dissimulation, the general significance of which resides in conveying indirectly a deeper message underlying the more superficial meaning that seems to be communicated. But the reformulation of irony, as it materialized in the Romantic age, seems to carry us beyond this era and far into the nineteenth century, where ironic ambivalence presents itself in a more interiorized, psychological, and existential fashion. It is the dilemma of the modern author faced with the paradox of striving to communicate while possessing an intensified distrust towards his creative powers. One of the most striking illustrations of this trend is Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground*, in which a despicable creature, a "negative hero," introduced as "one of the characters of the recent past, one of the representatives of the current generation," addresses a nonexistent audience in painfully self-degrading monologues:

Gentlemen....Can you really be so credulous as to think that I will print all this and give it to you to read too? And another problem: why do I really call you "gentlemen," why do I address you as though you really were my readers? Such declarations as I intend to make are never printed nor given to other people to read. Anyway, I am not strong-minded enough for that, and I don't see why I should be. But you see, a fancy

has occurred to me and I want to fulfill it at all costs. Let me explain. . . . I am writing for myself, and wish to declare once and for all that if I write as though I were addressing readers, that is simply because it is easier for me to write in that way. It is merely a question of form, only an empty form—I shall never have readers. I have made this plain already.⁵⁵

Out of these agonizing monologues there arises in indirect presentation one of the most intense criticisms of modern civilization, of rationalistic optimism, which is compressed into vivid formulas such as the "crystal palace," the "anthill," the "chicken coop," or the equation "two times two make four," where free will is impossible. This underground man is deeply convinced that there must really exist something dearer to man than the greatest advantage dictated by reason, something so desirable that to obtain it man is ready to act in opposition to the "sublime and beautiful" things established by the "lovers of mankind." By illuminating this innermost discrepancy between reason and will, a discordance epitomized in the sin committed by man for the sole purpose of proving his freedom, Dostoevski presents the overwhelming paradox of existence.⁵⁶

This antagonism of aboveground and underground, reason and heart, vitality and decadence, intellect and life, leads us back to Nietzsche and to some of the initial observations of this paper. We are also touching upon the familiar theme of the double, a motif brought into focus by Romantic authors,⁵⁷ accentuated by Dostoevski, but given a keener note by Nietzsche when with respect to precisely this existential dualism, he said of himself: "Ich bin ein Doppelgänger."⁵⁸ Indeed, Nietzsche's vacillation between contradictory views of life and his premise that existence permits infinite interpretations represent a milestone in the development of the ironic attitude. Furthermore, his idea of perspectivism and his gift for reversing perspectives imply, in the last analysis, a break with the belief in one common and general truth. In other words, when dissimulation takes place among mutually exclusive interpretations of existence, it has reached its sharpest expression. With regard to the opposition of life and intellect, of vitality and decadence, so basic to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, Nietzsche said:

Von der Kranken-Optik aus nach gesünderen Begriffen und Werten, und wiederum umgekehrt aus der Fülle und Selbstgewissheit des reichen Lebens hinuntersehen in die heimliche Arbeit des Décadence-Instinkts—das war meine längste Übung, meine eigentliche Erfahrung, wenn irgendworin wurde ich darin Meister. Ich habe es jetzt in der Hand, ich habe die Hand dafür, Perspektiven umzustellen.⁵⁹

This ironical shifting—in Nietzschean fashion—between two poles, between the relishing of abundant vitality and the decadent retreat from life, appears to be a further variation of the classical figure of irony in that the stand taken on one side of the antinomy points indirectly to its opposite pole. Yet Nietzsche did not designate this as irony. Having rejected Romanticism,

he also had to reject the term irony, which had too Romantic a flavor for his taste. He preferred the classical concept of "dissimulatio," which he rendered by the word "mask." It was Thomas Mann who saw in this alternation the essence of irony, which mediated between the salient antinomies of life and intellect, but he also gave it a harmonizing, humanizing touch:

Wir lieben ihn (den Vorbehalt) im Geistigen als Ironie—jene nach beiden Seiten gerichtete Ironie, welche verschlagen und unverbindlich, wenn auch nicht ohne Herzlichkeit, zwischen den Gegensätzen spielt und es mit Parteinahme und Entscheidung nicht sonderlich eilig hat: voll der Vermutung, dass in grossen Dingen, in Dingen des Menschen, jede Entscheidung als vorschnell und vorgütig sich erweisen möchte, dass nicht Entscheidung das Ziel ist, sondern der Einklang,—welcher, wenn es sich um ewige Gegensätze handelt, im Unendlichen liegen mag, den aber jener spielende Vorbehalt, Ironie genannt, in sich selber trägt, wie der Vorbehalt die Auflösung.⁶⁰

One could perhaps go on to envision more modern and even contemporary literary techniques as further modifications of the basic figure of irony, yet this domain will be left unexplored here except for one final observation concerning the underlying supposition of the present paper. This is the idea that with respect to certain devices and literary forms, Western literature forms a whole to such a degree that the classical age is essential to the understanding of modern times. The history of literature thus appears as a continuous progression, carrying with it the acquisitions of the past as models for the future, to be renewed in unique and unexpected ways. This is, in fact, Friedrich Schlegel's thesis, and referring to the interrelationship of past and future, tradition and innovation, he once remarked, "Alles Alte wird neu durchs Studium des Klassischen, und alles Neue sei alt, d.h. klassisch, und wird alt, d.h. übertroffen, antiquiert."⁶¹

NOTES

1. The present paper was originally presented in the Comparative Literature lecture series of 1968 at Stanford University, but also read at Rice University in 1969, where it was introduced by Robert L. Kahn.

2. Especially by Oskar Walzel, *Deutsche Romantik* (Leipzig, 1918), II, 56 ff. Raymond Immerwahr, however, considers Tieck's irony only as the "subjective" form of Romantic irony and confronts it with so-called "objective" irony, which was theoretically formulated by Friedrich Schlegel: "The Subjectivity and Objectivity of Romantic Irony," *Germanic Review* 26 (1951), 173-191.

3. Tieck's *Werke*, edited by Gotthold Ludwig Klee (Leipzig-Vienna, 1892), I, 109 ff.

4. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, edited by Ernst Behler in cooperation with Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner (Paderborn-Darmstadt, 1958 ff.), II (ed. H. Eichner), 152, 160. Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, translated, introduced and annotated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1958), pp. 126, 131.

5. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 172 (No. 51), 217 (No. 305); *Dialogue*, pp. 136, 147.

6. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 149 (No. 28); *Dialogue*, p. 123.
7. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 204 (No. 228); *Dialogue*, p. 145.
8. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 182 (No. 116); *Dialogue*, 140. On these aspects of Schlegel's concept of irony, cf. Ernst Behler, "Die Theorie der romantischen Ironie im Lichte der handschriftlichen Fragmente Friedrich Schlegels," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 88 (1969), 90 ff.
9. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 368.
10. Grabbe's *Werke*, edited by Albin Franz and Paul Zaunert (Leipzig-Vienna, 1910), I, 287 ff.
11. *Confrontations*, Studies in the intellectual and literary relations between Germany, England, and the United States during the 19th century (Princeton, 1965), p. 21.
12. *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, 133, 137 f. As Schlegel explains, however, this attitude is based on "heiligster Ernst" (*ibid.*).
13. Clemens Brentano, *Werke*, edited by Friedhelm Kemp (Munich, 1963), II, 237.
14. *Novalis' Schriften*, edited by Richard Samuel (Stuttgart, 1960), III, 685.
15. *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Nino Erné (Hamburg, 1964), II, 34.
16. On this topic, cf. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, XI, 246 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie (Werke)*, edited by Karl Schlechta, I, 38, ¶5).
17. *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Ernst Elster, I, 175 f.
18. *Jubiläumsausgabe*, edited by Hermann Glockner, XII, 105; II, 516. On this controversy, cf. Ernst Behler, "Friedrich Schlegel und Hegel," *Hegel-Studien* 2 (1963), 203 ff.
19. *The Concept of Irony*, translated by Lee M. Capel (New York, 1965), pp. 292 f.
20. C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (New York, 1961), pp. 149 ff.
21. Canto I, 201.
22. Stendhal's novel has, however, also been characterized as a realistic novel, e.g., by Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Bern, 1946), p. 409. Cf. also the epigraph to the 13th chapter: "Un roman: c'est un miroir qu'on promène le long d'un chemin" (Garnier Classics [Paris-New York], p. 76).
23. Léon Blum, *Stendhal et Belyisme* (Paris, 1947), pp. 120 ff.
24. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, ¶¶40, 26: *Werke* II, 591.
25. *Werke* III, 1250.
26. Norman Knox, *The Word Irony and its Context, 1500-1755* (Duke University Press, 1955). Ernst Behler, "Der Ursprung des Begriffs der tragischen Ironie," *Arcadia* 5 (1970), 113 ff.
27. Maximilian E. Novak and Herbert J. Davis, *Irony in Defoe and Swift* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 16. Cf. Daniel Defoe, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters and other Pamphlets* (London, 1948), pp. 113 ff., 218, 261.
28. *The Prose Works*, ed. by H. Davis, XII: *Irish Tracts, 1728-1733* (Oxford, 1955), p. 207.
29. *De Or.* II 67, 270.
30. *The Prose Works* XII, 109 ff.
31. Cf. Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel* (New York, 1970), pp. 59-64, 67-74.

32. Book IV, chapters 24–25. Cf. Oskar Seidlin, "Ironische Brüderschaft. Thomas Manns 'Joseph der Ernährere' und Laurence Sternes 'Tristram Shandy,'" *Von Goethe zu Thomas Mann* (Göttingen, 1963); Wayne C. Booth, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before Tristram Shandy," *PMLA* 67 (1952), 163 ff.

33. *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 3d ed. by Eduard Böcking (Leipzig, 1846), pp. 199 ff.

34. Walter J. Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Harvard University Press, 1963); Barbara Konneker, *Wesen und Wandlung der Narrenidee im Zeitalter des Humanismus*, Brant, Murner, Erasmus (Wiesbaden, 1966).

35. I. Cor. 4. 10.—*Encomium Moriae (Laus Stultitiae): Opera omnia* (Hildesheim, 1961–62: photostatic reprint of the edition of Leiden, 1703). Erasmus. *The Praise of Folly*, translated by John Wilson (Ann Arbor Paperbacks), pp. 129 f.

36. Pt. II, ch. 5. Cf. Helmut Hatzfeld, *Don Quixote als Wortkunstwerk* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1927).

37. Pt. II, ch. 2, 3.

38. Cf. especially Pt. II, ch. 5g.

39. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, with an Introduction, Notes and a Glossary by John Matthews Manly (New York, 1928), p. 430 (1895 ff.). The modern version by Nevill Coghill (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952).

40. Op. cit., p. 436 (2109 ff.).

41. Op. cit., pp. 491 f., 168 (743 ff.). Cf. Paul T. Thurston, *Artistic Ambivalence in Chaucer's Knight's Tale* (University of Florida Press); Earl Birney, "English Irony before Chaucer," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 6 (1936–37), 538 ff.

42. II, 115, 27.

43. Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948), pp. 91 ff., 157, 414, 457. (English translation by Willard R. Trask [New York, 1953], pp. 83 ff.)

44. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, ed. by Vincenzo Romano (Bari, 1951), I, 4. English translation: *Boccaccio on Poetry*, by Charles G. Osgood (Indianapolis—New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), pp. 6 f.

45. *Rhet.* III 18, 1419b, 7. English version by Lane Cooper (New York, 1932), p. 240.

46. *Eth. Nic.* II 7, 1108a, 19 ff; IV 13, 1127a, 20 ff.

47. *Acad. Pr.* II 5, 15.

48. *De or.* II 67, 270.

49. *Inst. or.* IX 2, 44.

50. IX 2, 46,

51. *Nubes*, 443 ff. Cf. Otto Ribbeck, "Über den Begriff des εἶρων," *Rheinisches Museum*, N. F. 31 (1876), 381 ff. Wilhelm Büchner, "Über den Begriff der Eironeia," *Hermes* 4 (1941), 341 f.

52. 337a.

53. *Eth. Nic.* IV, 13, 1127b, 22 ff.

54. Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*

(Indianapolis-New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1964) I, 5 f.

55. *Notes from the Underground*, translated by Ralph E. Matlaw (New York, 1960), pp. 34 ff.

56. Reinhard Lauth, *Die Philosophie Dostojewskijs in systematischer Darstellung* (München, 1950).

57. See also Shaftesbury's *Advice to an Author*, op. cit., p. 128.

58. *Ecce Homo* I, 3 (*Werke*, II, 1073).

59. *Ibid.*, p. 1071.

60. "Goethe und Tolstoi," *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden* (Oldenburg, 1006), IX, 170 f.

61. *Kritische Ausgabe*, XVIII, 26 (No. 88).